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ABSTRACT

An approach to writing for junior high through college writing and literature classes is presented in this brief article. AUTHOR'S COMMENT (excerpt): Writing from literature, instead of only about literature, can provide creative approaches to the study of literary works. The activities listed can be done in conjunction with the study of a single assigned book, or--in junior and senior high school--they can take the place of the traditional book report on outside reading. CLASSROOM EXERCISE (excerpt): (1) Pick a book you've read. (2) Pick a key character from that book. (3) Choose one major problem that character has. (4) Write a letter that your character might write about that problem to Ann Landers or Dear Abby. (5) When the writing is finished, place all the letters in a pile and scramble them. (6) Blindly select a letter from the pile. (7) As if you are Ann or Abby, write a response to the problem expressed in that letter. OTHER ACTIVITIES: Fifteen additional, increasingly complex, topics for writing from literature are described. Three sets of assignments containing multiple activities for a single work are suggested for "A Separate Peace," "When Legends Die," and "Macbeth." (KC)

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Writing From Literature

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Level:

Junior high through college writing and literature classes

Author's Comment

The following activities are based on several observations and assumptions: 1) Writing too often is taught in a vacuum; 2) students are often required to write on topics they know little about and couldn't care less about; 3) "academic" writing often has greater legitimacy than "creative" writing, especially because of the basic skills emphasis of recent years; 4) students almost always write for one audience: a nebulous, general, no-one-in-particular reader who is usually only the instructor.

Writing *from* literature, instead of only *about* literature, can provide creative approaches with academically respectable topics written for specific alternative audiences. Thus, academic skills are not sacrificed to interest; and writing can be both academic *and* creative. The activities listed below can be done in conjunction with the study of a single assigned book, or—in junior and senior high school—they can take the place of the traditional book report on outside reading.

These topics are only suggestions. Some are for well-known classics; others are for more contemporary teenage novels. Each topic can be modified to "fit" different pieces of literature or to accommodate students of greater or lesser sophistication.

The first activity is the easiest. One can see why it works well with junior high school writers, but many college writers can enjoy and benefit from it as well. Be careful not to reject it because of its simplicity and seemingly non-academic quality.

Classroom Exercise:

1. Pick a book you've read.
2. Pick a key character from that book: e.g. Patty Bergen from *Summer of My German Soldier;* John or Lorraine from *The Pigman;* Holden Caulfield from *Catcher in the Rye;* Sophie from *Sophie's Choice;* Biff from *Death of a Salesman.*
3. Choose one major problem that character has: e.g. Lorraine's feeling that her mother picks on her; Sophie's concern about Nathan's rages and his callous treatment of her; Biff's inability to express his feelings to his father.
4. Write a letter that your character might write about that problem to Ann Landers or Dear Abby.
5. When the writing is finished, place all the letters in a pile and scramble them.
6. Blindly select a letter from the pile, making sure it's not about the same problem you wrote about. (A different character, where possible, is also preferable.)
7. As if you are Ann or Abby, write a response to the problem expressed in that letter.

The chief advantages of this activity are its brevity and simplicity, and almost every student type is familiar with the length and kinds of letters which appear in the daily newspapers. Note, also, that in order to do this seemingly trivial assignment well, the student must have read the literary work carefully enough to understand the chara-

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ter's problem and emotions regarding it; must understand and be able to reproduce the language sophistication, style, and possibly dialect of the character; should be able to reproduce the typical Dear Abby letter's format and response style; and, writing as Abby or Ann, ought to exhibit a tactful, thoughtful response to the character's problem. The assignment is thus creative in that it requires some originality and a voice not usually called for in literary analysis papers; it also has an academic legitimacy in that it requires analytical skills, a proper form, and convincing description as well as analysis.

Other Topics for Writing from Literature:

1. A *newspaper account* of events from the book—e.g. a sports report of Alfred's big fight in *The Contender;* a society column about a big party in *The Great Gatsby;* a feature story on the rodeo exploits of Thomas Black Bull in *When the Legends Die.*

2. A *letter* from one character to another—e.g. from Holden to his brother to describe his adventure in New York City from *Catcher in the Rye;* from Slim to George two years after the ending of *Of Mice and Men.*

3. A *script* for the Evening News—either radio or television—about an incident from the book—e.g. the discovery of the hiding place in the Secret Annex in *Anne Frank;* the death of Adam's father and mother in *I Am the Cheese;* the assassination of Caesar in *Julius Caesar.*

4. An *entry in Who's Who* for a main character—e.g. Shane from *Shane;* Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird;* Zhivago from *Doctor Zhivago.*

5. A *letter of recommendation* for a character—for a job or "Man of the Year" or some award—e.g. for Brother Leon for a teaching position in a new school from *The Chocolate War;* for one of the doctors from *Hiroshima;* for Beth in *Ordinary People.*

6. A *eulogy* for a character—e.g. father in *Sounder;* Kizzy in *Roots;* Paul Baumer in *All Quiet on the Western Front.*

7. A *citation* from the mayor or a civic group to praise a character's actions—e.g. for Ben's heroism in *Deathwatch;* for Sidney Carlton's sacrifice in *Tale of Two Cities.*

8. An *obituary* for a character—e.g. for Haven Peck in *A Day No Pigs Would Die;* for Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman.*

9. A *plea* from a character to a television audience for understanding of his or her motive for acting in a certain way—e.g. Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment;* Miro in *After the First Death;* Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.*

10. A *newspaper editorial* about an issue (or theme) in the book—e.g. teenage violence in *The Outsiders;* the practice of weaseling dogs in *A Day No Pigs Would Die;* censorship in *Fahrenheit 451.*

11. A *personal letter* to a character in the story—e.g. to Holden in *Catcher in the Rye* to explain how you feel about your parents in comparison to his feelings about his; to Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* about her treatment of the inmates.

12. A *questionnaire* administered to the public about an issue from the book—e.g. the mistreatment of dogs in *Call of the Wild;* test-tube babies in *Brave New World*—and then a *report* on the findings.

13. A *dialogue* between two characters, either from the same novel or from different ones—e.g. a discussion between John and his mother in *The Pigman;* an accidental meeting outside a bar between Jake Gatsby from *The Great Gatsby* and Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman.*

14. An *interview* with a character, with you as interviewer or with someone else as interviewer—e.g. you interview Charlie in *Flowers for Algernon;* Gloria Steinem interviews Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter.*

15. A *psychiatrist's report*—e.g. on Tony in *Then Again, Maybe I Won't;* on Katsuk in *Soul Catcher;* on Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness.*

Several Activities for a Single Work:

Each of the above activities seems to be limited to a single work of literature. In fact, several different activities can be assigned for a specific book. Students can be required to do all of them or to select one or more from a suggested list. Three sets of assignments follow:

A Separate Peace

1. A *diary entry* for each of several days to record Gene's feelings about some of Phineas' actions—e.g. the war games, the pranks, the athletic activities, the fall from the tree.
2. A *letter home* from Phineas describing his first impressions of Gene; or from Gene describing one of his encounters with Phineas.
3. A *newspaper account* of Phineas' fall from the tree.
4. A *eulogy* Gene might write for Phineas' funeral.
5. A *questionnaire* that might be distributed to the boys at the school to determine their interests: fill out a copy as Phineas might have, or as Gene might have, or as other characters might have.
6. A *citation* from the town to the student body for their help during the snow removal.

When the Legends Die

1. An *editorial* about the treatment of Indian kids at a BIA school.
2. An *advertisement* (ironic) for the Indian school.
3. A series of *newspaper accounts* of Tom Black's rodeo exploits.
4. A *letter of recommendation* for Tom Black to become "Cowboy of the Year."
5. A *personal letter* from Tom to Mary Redmond written after he returns to the mountains.
6. An *obituary* for Red Dillon.

Macbeth

1. A *script* for the CBS Evening News recounting the murder of Duncan, or of Banquo, or of the death of Macbeth.
2. A *psychiatrist's report* on Lady Macbeth.
3. An *entry in Who's Who* for Macbeth.
4. An *ultimatum* from Macduff to Macbeth to surrender.
5. A *diary entry* of one of the Murderers about the events leading up to the murder of Banquo.
6. A *suicide note* from Lady Macbeth to her husband.
7. An *obituary* for Macbeth.
8. A *recipe* for a witches' brew.